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ABSTRACT

According to this paper, rural community colleges face new challenges, which require openness to institutional partnerships that in the past may have been unthinkable due to traditional institutional competitiveness. These challenges include enrollment fluctuation, increased legislative scrutiny, calls for accountability, inadequate and inconsistent funding, and higher education's general loss of public esteem. The authors argue that institutional collaboration is practical for rural community colleges for four reasons: (1) the politics of educational reform has created the need for meaningful collaborative efforts between community colleges; (2) the transformation of the economy from technology-based to information-based has increased awareness of institutional interdependence; (3) struggling rural community colleges can gain insight from their sister institutions; and (4) as demands for accountability increase, collaborations can provide avenues to lower costs while sustaining availability, quality, and integrity of programming and services at rural community colleges. This paper defines an educational consortium as an alliance whose purpose is to serve their member institutions, with the mission of enabling its members to achieve, through cooperation, that which cannot be achieved alone. Rural community colleges in particular can benefit from academic consortia by giving the institutions more clout with local, state, and federal politicians; making business and industry alliances stronger; and increasing funding and grant opportunities. (Contains 11 references.) (Author/NB)

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Community colleges in the United States take pride in being independent and autonomous institutions. Two-year colleges have prospered because they are willing to face tough political issues and compete successfully for diminishing economic resources. Rural community colleges in particular need leaders with truly innovative thinking who will reach creative answers to the complex challenges they currently face. Part of this innovative judgment has involved relationships with other institutions in their communities: businesses, local school districts, social agencies, and community-based institutions (McGrath, 1998). Today, however, rural community colleges face new challenges which require openness to interinstitutional partnerships that in the past may have been unthinkable due to traditional institutional competitiveness. These challenges include enrollment fluctuations, increased legislative scrutiny, calls for accountability, inadequate and inconsistent funding, and higher education's general loss of public esteem. This article suggests that building institutional capacity through collaboration and institutional consortia among rural community colleges may be in the best interest of all institutions involved.

Given the strong tradition of rivalry and autonomy in higher education, is collaboration practical for rural community colleges? For at least four basic reasons, the answer to this question must be a resounding yes. First, the politics of educational reform has created the need for meaningful collaborative efforts between community colleges. Second, the transformation of our nation's economy from an industrial base to an economy based on information processing, technology, and service has increased the consciousness of rural educational leaders, political leaders, and the public regarding institutional interdependence. Third, rural community colleges struggling with common

challenges can gain insights to potentially successful innovations from their sister institutions. Finally, as demands for accountability have increased, collaborations can provide avenues to lower costs while sustaining the availability, quality, and integrity of programming and services at rural community colleges.

What is an educational consortium?

A consortium may be an alliance of people, groups, or organizations that have joined together to offer practical solutions to the common problems and the challenges faced by the rural community college. Neal (1988) referred to consortia as semi-permanent organizations typically supported by financial contributions from members, with a mission of facilitating cooperative activities between and among member institutions. According to Lewis Patterson, academic consortia share several distinctive characteristics; they are usually: voluntary, multi-institutional, multifunctional, beneficiaries of long-term member support, and managed by professional staff members (as cited in Baus & Ramsbottom, 1999, p. 4).

Each consortium is unique, but the broad goals of almost every consortium are to "achieve more, do something better, or reduce the cost of an activity" (Neal, 1988, p.3). Academic consortia exist to serve their member institutions, and the mission of a consortium is typically to enable its members to achieve, through cooperation, that which cannot be achieved alone (Baus & Ramsbottom, 1999). While every member institution has different needs, each expects to get something of value for its participation in the collaboration.

Baus (1988) provided four principles of consortia that described why institutions of higher education might participate in a consortium:

1. The "primary motivation for institutional cooperation is self-interest" (p. 26), and institutions usually seek collaboration from a position of strength.
2. While the basis of consortium activity is consensus formation, it is usually cost savings or political factors that stimulate individual institutions to action.
3. Consortia usually have no independent mission but are successful only to the extent they enhance the mission, programs, and services of their constituent members or help solve their problems.
4. The effectiveness of any consortium ultimately depends on each member recognizing and accepting its limitations as an individual institution and each member seeing the value in exceeding those limits by entering into partnerships.

Benefits of participating in a rural community college consortium

Consortia are among the best vehicles available to rural community colleges to meet the challenges currently placed before them. The following list contains several benefits of entering into collaborative initiatives (Baus & Ramsbottom, 1999; McGrath 1998; Williams & Pennington, 2002):

1. The ability to attract a larger number of people and perspectives into the problem solving process.
2. Higher quality solutions are possible.
3. Each stakeholder is ensured a voice and all parties are more likely to retain ownership of the solution.

4. General relationships between stakeholders are likely to improve, and coordination of future actions becomes more likely.
5. Member institutions may be able to leverage their limited assets while seeking grants and other funding opportunities.
6. There are enhanced opportunities for expanded professional development activities.
7. Cost savings may be available through joint purchases and sharing equipment and facilities.
8. The political clout of small rural institutions can be greatly increased.

How a rural consortium can work

The role of the community college is to help prepare all citizens for a better life, but the task of preparing students to live and work in a rapidly evolving technological society is multifaceted and expensive. When institutions and entities want to achieve a challenging goal, they often band together to strengthen their position and increase their chances of achieving the goal; consortia appear to provide an opportunity for community colleges to maintain their place in the higher education community (McGrath, 1998; Smith, Opp, Armstrong, Stewart, & Isaacson, 1999).

The advantages of collaboration were highlighted by Pennington and Williams (2001) through the example of the community college's role in preparing people for a rapidly changing workforce in an information-based economy. The explosion of information technology has increased pressures on community colleges not only to be more competitive in development of institutional programs and services but also to be

more efficient in the delivery of those programs and services. Institutions working independently are often unable to afford new or updated technology in a timely manner. Further, they find it difficult to establish new programs based on expensive technology. How can a consortium help individual institutions deal with this situation? First, a well-publicized consortium gives the participating institutions more clout with local, state and federal politicians. Further, a consortium can effectively approach business and industry associated with information technology through a greater depth and breadth of perspective in order to explain the needs, concerns and abilities of the community colleges. This combination of increased political influence and a broader understanding of the potential of the community college can be transformed into funding and grant opportunities for the consortium and its member institutions to build needed infrastructure for the desired technology.

Additionally, rural community colleges can often find benefits in creating partnerships involving four-year institutions as well as other community colleges. These inter-sector collaborations may involve academic agreements and articulation (May & Smith, 1992), shared services (e.g., purchasing), equipment and facilities (Dorger, 1999; Pennington & Williams, 2001), professional development initiatives (Williams & Pennington, 2002), distance education programs, and economic development projects (McGrath, 1998) and community development activities (Williams, 2002).

Sustaining a rural community college consortium

By forming strategic alliances, rural community colleges can bring their programs and services to new levels. Once rural community college consortia are established, several conditions can help to keep the viability of the partnership intact.

- A clear vision for the consortium, including clearly defined goals, a focus on real problems, and a realistic assessment of what each institution is seeking to gain from participation (Baus & Ramsbottom, 1999).
- Successful rural community college consortia must have a clear and agreed upon sense of mission and purpose, often found in a written mission statement.
- Effective communication across the consortium is important, but efficient communication within each participating member of the consortium is essential for success.
- Presidential and other senior-level administrative involvement in the consortium gives the effort credibility and ensures the organization keeps focused on strategically important issues.
- Staff administering the consortia should serve as "a source of institutional memory" (Baus and Ramsbottom, 1999, p. 16) and provide continuity to the effort by orienting new representatives from member institutions.
- Participation in a rural community college consortium should "increase each institution's capability to respond to community development needs" (Williams, 2002, p. 34).

Barriers to consortial success

Creating consortial relationships between rural community colleges is a difficult process. Sustaining an existing consortium even more challenging for the people maintaining the relationship. The following list of "lacks" and "fears" faced by consortium members is compiled from the works of Dorger (1999) and Johnson (1988).

1. Lack of a clear understanding of the consortium's mission, purpose, and goals especially among top administrators of member institutions.
2. Lack of a realistic assessment of what the member institutions hope to gain from participation in the consortium.
3. Lack of effective communication both within the consortium and with individual member institutions.
4. Lack of support/commitment from senior-level administrators from each institution participating in the consortium.
5. Lack of opportunity for faculty participation in the consortium.
6. Fear that money and time could be wasted by participation in the consortium.
7. Fear of restrictive and convoluted decision-making processes hampering true collaboration.
8. Fear that collaboration is a zero sum process in which some institutions must "lose" for others to "win".
9. Fear of being forced to cooperate in areas that should remain "competitive" such as admissions or fund-raising.
10. Fear of pressure to participate in weak and unnecessary programming.

Conclusion

Rural community colleges, perhaps even more than their urban and suburban counterparts, face a myriad of challenges and are looked upon to provide a variety of academic, economic development, and community enhancement services. These institutions are seen as a natural source of leadership in rural initiatives. Rural areas often lag behind suburban and urban communities in terms of economic prosperity and educational achievement, and the ability to resolve rural problems often goes beyond the capacity of any single institution. By establishing working relationships with other institutions of higher education, the rural community college can become even more effective in meeting the unique needs of rural areas.

Obviously, consortia are not a universal remedy for all of the challenges facing rural community colleges. Indeed, consortia have not begun to meet their full potential in providing rural community colleges with long-term solutions to the challenges and hardships that could threaten their very existence. Based on current political, economic, and institutional concerns, it seems likely that interinstitutional consortia will continue to play an ever-increasing role in the future of rural community colleges.

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